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Reforming the Doctoral Programme in Universities: To What End?

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Regulations to maintain standards of PhD programmes have led to the curbing of university autonomy.

Universities in India have been offering doctoral programmes for close to 150 years. Most of these years they, like universities elsewhere in the world, were free to prescribe their rules and regulations.

This decentralised autonomous self-regulating system served the nation well, till experimentation began with minimum eligibility conditions for appointment and promotion of faculty members in universities and colleges. Each new regulation has taken away a little more autonomy of the universities in academic matters.

Caught in the NET

A National Eligibility Test (NET) for appointments was made mandatory in 1989. Since those with PhD were exempt from the test, there was a rush to get the degree. In the process, the norms, standards, and procedures were seriously compromised, so much so that getting a PhD was considered easier than clearing the NET.

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Malpractices in awarding PhDs were used as a reason to introduce, in 2009, [regulations to maintain minimum standards](#). Since then, the UGC has been amending, re-amending, and superseding the regulation to maintain the quality and standards of the PhD degree, but to no avail. Each newer regulation appeared to be a rush job, with clarification and amendments issued in a short time (even as quickly as [within three days](#) of issuing the 2022 regulation.)

In time, the regulations have become more prescriptive. The trend perpetuates in the 2022 regulation, which leaves little to the imagination, interpretation, and discretion of universities.

Like the 2016 regulation, it specifies the eligibility conditions, norms, standards, and procedures for admission. It prescribes the eligibility conditions for appointment as a research guide, allotment of supervisors, and the ceiling on the number of research scholars who could be allotted under a supervisor. It delineates the procedure for the submission of theses the appointment of examiners, the submission and evaluation of theses and the award of the degree.

It prohibits faculty members due for retirement in less than three years from being appointed as research guides, probably out of concerns that research scholars must not suffer due to the superannuation of their supervisor. This is notwithstanding the fact that faculty members would love to continue their association with their universities and would be happy to see their research scholars through their work pro bono.

The new regulation seeks to normalise the practice of admissions to the PhD programme after a four-year undergraduate degree, which is currently a practice only at a few central universities and national institutions.

Such PhD programmes assume that catching students young, when their creativity and energy are at their peak, promotes excellence in research. Some of such students have done remarkably well, albeit outside India. There is hardly any data or systematic study to prove the point in the domestic context.

The new regulation retains the coursework as prescribed in earlier regulations with a two-credit compulsory course on research and publication. It does not require additional coursework for those entering the PhD programme after an undergraduate degree. It probably assumes that they would master postgraduate-level knowledge through their research work. Only time would tell how their lack of postgraduate training would play out when it comes to teaching postgraduate classes.

|| The new regulation [...] could enhance enrolment in research degree programmes by providing opportunities to practitioners.

Going back to the good old days, the new regulation now once again permits people to pursue PhD on a part-time basis. This route was quite the norm until 2010. Since then, the regulations insisted that a PhD must be pursued on a full-time basis to ensure quality and promote excellence in research. This could enhance enrolment in research degree programmes by providing opportunities to practitioners.

The new regulation is a relief for people holding a foreign qualification. They now need not obtain equivalence in India so long as their degrees are awarded by a foreign educational institution accredited by an approved or recognised assessment and accrediting agency.

The new regulation requires that one of the two external examiners be from "outside India, wherever possible." This may make the evaluation expensive and time-consuming. Interests of research scholars have, however, been safeguarded by making it mandatory for universities to complete the evaluation process within six months from the date of submission of the theses.

Incentivising publishing

The 2022 regulation removes an earlier provision which demanded that a research scholar must publish a research paper before submitting the thesis. The regulation itself gives no reason or justification for the decisions but public statements indicate that the requirement has been dispensed with to curb publications in predatory journals.

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The decision may take publication-related stress off research scholars and save them the cost and time that the publication of a paper entails. On the flip side, it could cause a substantial decline in the publication tally of India, which is already less than its potential.

At the same time, the predatory journals and unethical publication practices would continue to flourish as the faculty members and scientists need to publish to get promotion and recognition as research supervisors. (PhD students account for **only 32%** of the publications in such journals. The rest are published by postdocs/young scientists (23%), and faculty members/scientists (45%).

India must aspire to publish more to improve its rank in the global publication indices. SCOPUS database of scientific publications for 2020 ranked India as the **fourth largest producer** of scientific research in the world with 192,000 papers, next only to China (744,000), the USA (625,000 lakh) and the UK (199,000).

India, however, accounted for merely 4.52% of the total research papers published in the world. The country must encourage, incentivise and enable not only the research scholars but also the undergraduate and graduate students to publish. The challenge lies in finding ways and means of providing cost-effective opportunities for researchers to publish in quality journals with ease and speed. Presently, the system is seriously constrained in this regard due to the limited availability of quality journals.

Taken as a whole, there are fewer than 30,000 journals which an estimated 12.5 million researchers across the world chase to get their research published. Consequently, they stare at a long wait and a high rejection rate. This creates a conducive condition for commerce to capitalise.

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Predatory journals and publishers publish articles and research papers quickly but for a price. Sadly, they are not the only ones to do so. Many highly rated quality journals also charge hefty fees to publish research in open-source versions.

The situation calls for government and higher education regulators to support and handhold high-quality, non-commercial, academic, and scientific publication initiatives by universities and professional societies. This will ensure the publication of high-quality refereed journals in large numbers, which, in turn, would provide quality avenues for researchers to report their research results. This may save researchers from falling prey to predatory practices.

It should not be big deal for the all-powerful higher education regulator to prop up the research culture in higher education institutions and to create an ecosystem where peer pressure promotes a sense of pride amongst researchers for publishing high-quality research papers.

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